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Making a Difference with Psychology

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In 2015, the School of Psychology ran a third year psychology undergraduate option module called 'Social Psychology in the Workplace'. The module was designed by Alexandra Kent, with Yvonne Skipper, to address the university's employability agenda as students formed consultancy firms and used psychology to solve real world problems. The module was well received by students who took it, but we wanted to increase the number of students who chose the module.

At this time, Julie Hulme joined the module team. She had attended a Higher Education Academy retreat on the future of psychology, and realised that the discipline as a whole was undergoing a shift, which this module reflected. Traditionally, psychology had been taught as an empirical and theoretical science, but there was a growing emphasis on applying psychology to solve problems in everyday life, in employment, and in society. For example, using psychology to change behaviour can improve sustainability, health, and education. Within psychology education, this set of skills and knowledge is known as 'psychological literacy'.

In this context, the team discussed ways to make the module more attractive to students, and we realised that we could broaden the remit of the module, and to address the broader theme of psychological literacy. We consulted with students, changing the title to 'Making a Difference with Psychology', and planned ways to embed problem-solving skills in an engaging way. We needed an innovative approach, and student input was important.

We developed a structure that scaffolds students into independent learning. The module begins with interactive lectures on the psychology of leadership, involving military and police guest speakers. We move to peer learning exercises around the psychology of aspirations, with a speaker from a local charity for looked-after young people, and then into problem-based learning, with students developing ways to improve learning in education and training. Finally, students independently complete a consultancy-style assessment, in which they respond to an 'invitation to tender' (written in consultation with the local organisations, using authentic assessments) proposing a practical intervention and providing an academic rationale. Wherever possible, the students' ideas are fed back to employers and have genuine impact. We all find the idea of the module contributing to the local community exciting!

The module also prepares students for interviews, providing concrete examples of problem-solving skills, and an ability to analyse information critically. This gives students confidence in their abilities: *"Behind every world problem lies human psychology; as students, we discover where theoretical concepts can be applied to issues in society, which is the origin of our initial interest. The module is interactive and allows us to meet the needs of real organisations. Engaging with innovative solutions goes beyond mere academic achievement, preparing us for opportunities where we **can** make a difference."*

The module is now popular. Student achievement is strong, and students are proud of their development and problem-solving skills. Partner organisations have also made use of student ideas. As tutors, we find the module immensely rewarding; we see our students become creative thinkers who can draw from their whole psychology curriculum to apply their knowledge, and who enjoy chasing down new information as part of the process.

As a team, we've learned a lot from our experiences. Some of the key lessons include:

- Students enjoy learning challenging material when they can see its relevance to everyday life;
- Employability and everyday problem-solving skills are similar, and students can find this type of learning stimulating;
- Students can be ingeniously creative, and tutors can benefit from this in terms of co-developing mutually rewarding teaching experiences.